DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 205 CS 211 302

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TITLE Editors' Attitudes and Behavior toward Journalism Awards.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Awards; *Editors; Journalism; Motivation; *Newspapers; Press Opinion; Professional Development; *Professional Recognition; Rewards
IDENTIFIERS *Journalists

ABSTRACT

To begin to pinpoint the forces at work in prize journalism, a study examined the value that managing editors of daily newspapers place on awards. Whether editors agree with their papers' awards policies and what they feel most affects reporters' attitudes about contests were also explored. In October 1984, questionnaires were mailed to 317 managing editors randomly selected by circulation size from the 1984 "Editor and Publisher Yearbook," yielding 157 replies. Results showed that most newspapers in this study had policies, usually informal, that encouraged prize seeking. The largest papers were most likely to have formal awards policies, while lack of policy was most prevalent among the smallest papers. Most editors concurred with their papers' policies on contests. Increased prestige for the newspaper and for the reporter were regarded by most editors as among the greatest benefits of journalism awards, but only half of the editors considered proof of excellence as a primary value of competitions. (Twenty-three notes are attached.) (ARH)

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Newspaper Division:
"Instruction and Incentives in Writing"

EDITORS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR TOWARD JOURNALISM AWARDS

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Presented to the 76th Annual Convention
of the Association for Education in Journalism
and Mass Communication
Portland, Oregon, July 2, 1988

CS 211302

ABSTRACT

EDITORS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

TOWARD JOURNALISM AWARDS

To begin to pinpoint the forces at work in prize journalism, this study examines the value that managing editors of daily newspapers place on awards. Whether editors agree with their papers' awards policies and what they feel most affects reporters' attitudes about contests are also explored. Increased prestige for the newspaper and for the reporter were regarded by most editors as among the greatest benefits of journalism awards, but only half of the editors considered proof of excellence as a primary value of competitions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank statistician Stephen Jenkins and research assistant Michael Wilson for their valuable help with the study. Appreciation is also extended to Rosemary Peacock for sharing her data.

EDITORS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR TOWARD JOURNALISM AWARDS

The disturbing episode of **Washington Post** reporter Janet Cooke falsifying a Pulitzer Prize-winning story and similar ensuing disclosures afflicting the press have focused public attention on prize-seeking in journalism.

Pressure on reporters to produce celebrated stories may originate with editors who share in the homage when a reporter wins an award, who comprehend the prestige value of awards to their newspapers. It is therefore meaningful to investigate editors' attitudes and behavior toward awards to begin to pinpoint the forces at work in prize journalism.

Specifically, this study examines the value that managing editors of daily newspapers place on awards. Whether editors agree with their papers' awards policies and what they feel most affects reporters' attitudes about contests are also explored.

The press seems preoccupied with prize winning.[1] Over 400 national and regional journalism competitions exist today,[2] and many awards are granted in multiple categories.[3]

Fears are expressed by some journalism educators that the press' emphasis on awards infiltrates the classroom. Too often instructors, taking their cues from editors, compel students to compete with each other for the big story.[4]

Much of what has been written about journalism prizes appears in newspapers and magazines. The print media routinely publish articles that proclaim the winners of major awards.[5] Other articles occasionally explain the politics and strategies of prize seeking.[6]

Less often reported is the coveting of awards that leads to unethical behavior.[7] Such conduct arises from an awareness that a major national prize can "confer instant esteem upon a newspaper or a fast career track upon a reporter."[8]

One of the few systematic studies of journalism prize winning was conducted in 1984.[9] Three Wisconsin researchers surveyed members of the Society of Professional Journalists and found that winning awards is related to perceived higher occupational prestige but not to higher job satisfaction.

In a companion study, they suggested that journalists perceive both professional and nonprofessional prizes as ways of "getting ahead" and concluded that the rewards function as part of the normative system for the press.[10]

Over a decade earlier Blankenburg surveyed managing editors of Associated Press-member papers about journalism contests.[11] He found that editors mainly valued competitions for offering recognition to journalists and their newspapers, providing an independent assessment of journalistic efforts, encouraging better work and improving staff morale.[12]

These findings are supported by an informal 1970 survey.[13] The respondents said they felt that prizes fostered

better journalism. But the majority believed that journalists should not accept cash awards from commercial interests.

Because little research has been done on editors' attitudes and behavior toward journalism prizes, exploratory research questions were used in this study. The following research questions were tested:

1) What type of awards policies do newspapers have?

2) Do editors agree with their papers' awards policies?

3) What value do editors place on prizes?

4) What advice do editors give reporters about contests?

5) What do editors feel most influences reporters' attitudes toward prizes?

Methods

This study is a reanalysis of recent data on editors' attitudes and behavior toward journalism prizes.[14] Managing editors were selected for the national survey because they typically oversee newsroom operations and set newsroom standards and procedures.[15] They are therefore in an excellent position to influence their staffs about contests.

In October 1984, 317 questionnaires were mailed. Editors were chosen from U.S. daily newspapers randomly selected by circulation size from the 1984 Editor & Publisher Yearbook. Two mailings yielded 157 replies, for a response rate of 49%.

The sample included editors from newspapers representing a broad range of circulation sizes, from the Wall Street Journal (about 2 million) to the Ely (Nev.) Daily Times

(about 2,000). Specifically, 62% of the responses came from editors of papers of less than 25,000 circulation; 19% came from those on newspapers of 25,000-49,000 circulation. Papers of 50,000-99,000 made up 11% of the sample, and newspapers of 100,000 circulation or more comprised 8% of the survey.[16]

Results

Consistent with earlier research,[17] more than 90% of the respondents worked for newspapers or with reporters who had recently received journalism prizes. Ninety percent of the editors considered the awards valuable.

Nearly as many had received awards during their careers as journalists. Eighty-two percent felt that their awards were prestigious; one half said the awards had helped them in their careers.

Awards policies

The majority of editors in all circulation groups said their newspapers have informal policies regarding prize competitions. Editors were about twice as likely to indicate this as to say their papers have no policies.

The largest newspapers made up almost half of the handful of papers with formal policies. No policy responses were most prevalent among the smallest papers (23%) and nonexistent among the largest papers.

Over three-fourths of the editors said their papers have policies that encourage contest entries, while 17 percent indicated that their papers do not take a position. Very few

editors said their papers require entries, and none had policies discouraging entries.

A slight majority of newspapers were selective in the competitions they encouraged or required journalists to enter. The smallest circulation group was by far the least selective in this regard.

Fifty-nine percent of the newspapers encouraged prize seeking through in-house praise of winners. About half as many papers featured winners in public advertising campaigns or provided assistance and advisement to contest entrants. Approximately one-fifth of the papers gave bonuses to contest winners or notified journalists in writing about contests.

Not surprisingly, virtually no papers discouraged prize seeking.

Agreement with awards policies

Most editors agreed with their papers' awards policies. A little more than half strongly agreed; 28% somewhat agreed. Those who worked for papers or with reporters who had won awards agreed more strongly with their papers' awards policies than did editors not associated with prize winning.

Editors working for newspapers of at least 25,000 circulation agreed more strongly with their papers' awards policies than editors on smaller publications. Further, editors on papers with formal or informal awards policies were in greater agreement with those policies than colleagues on papers with no awards policies.

Value of awards

Eighty percent of the editors, and all but one from the largest circulation group, checked increased prestige for the paper and the reporter as benefits of prize winning. Two-thirds said awards offer journalists performance incentives.

Proof of excellence and reward for the reporter were seen as the importance of awards by about half of the editors. Seventeen percent chose proof of beating the competition, and about the same number checked prize money.

Conversely, 80% of the editors perceived the time-consuming aspect of entry preparation to be the major drawback of awards competitions. Thirty-eight percent said entry preparation distracts staff from other work; a third felt it is expensive. In addition, 37% believed winning creates a false standard of excellence.

Only 29% of the editors felt that awards were more valuable on some beats than on others. Investigative reporting and editorial writing were the most frequent choices, garnering 20% and 18% of the responses respectively.

When hiring, or evaluating someone for a raise or promotion, nearly three-quarters of the editors rated a reporter's history of winning awards as slightly important to not important in comparison to experience, education and job performance. Twenty-seven percent felt prize winning was either an equally important or a somewhat important consideration. No one saw it as a very important factor.

As might be expected, the more emphasis editors placed on contest entries, the more weight they gave to prize winning when evaluating reporters. Editors who required contest entries placed the most importance on a reporter's awards record,[18] and editors who offered no advice placed the least value on it.

Editors who thought awards had helped them in their careers were more inclined than those who felt otherwise to give greater weight to awards records when evaluating reporters for raises or promotions. They were also likely to use prizes won by their staffs to impress their bosses.

Eighty percent of the respondents said they no more than occasionally used awards won by their staffs as proof to their superiors that their newsrooms were doing a good job. This included a quarter who said they never use prizes for such a purpose. By comparison, 18% reported frequently or always bringing awards to management's attention.

A large majority (62%) said they did not feel pressure to seek prizes or to have their staffs seek them. Of the editors that felt pressure, about three-fourths indicated that was the case only sometimes.

Editors who felt pressure to pursue awards were likely to work for papers or with reporters who had recently won awards. They were inclined to use prize winning to impress their bosses. By contrast, editors who did not feel an urgency to seek awards seldom used prizes for this purpose.

Those who felt that awards had helped them in their careers or who worked for papers that had recently won prizes were more apt than other editors to use awards to influence their bosses. Editors who believed that prize winning had helped advance their careers were also more likely to place a greater emphasis on a reporter's record at winning awards.

Advice to reporters

The vast majority of editors encouraged reporters to enter contests. Very few editors required it or offered no advice.

Those who required contest entries believed that winning awards had helped them in their careers. More than half of the editors who encouraged prize seeking said winning awards had helped them in their careers. Only a couple of those who offered no advice, however, felt that way.

The five editors who required contest entries frequently used awards won by their staffs as proof to their superiors that their newsrooms were doing a good job. Editors who encouraged contest entries used awards between occasionally and seldom to impress their bosses, whereas editors who offered no advice rarely did so.

Ninety-two percent of editors reported complying with their own awards policies when advising reporters about entering competitions. About half said they abided by both their personal policies and that of their papers. Only 8%

indicated that they complied with their papers' policies and not their own.

Influences on reporters' attitudes toward awards

Editors chose reporters' personal drive (82%) followed by professional competitiveness (67%) as contributing most to reporters' attitudes toward awards.[17] Nearly a third of the editors checked their and their papers' policies as affecting reporters' views of awards. Peer pressure was selected by 28% of the editors, and about a fifth cited prize money.

Nearly 40% thought they had a mild influence on reporters' attitudes toward prizes. A third felt they had a fairly strong influence compared to 18% who said they had very little influence. Five percent indicated no influence.

Editors who had won prizes indicated a stronger personal influence on reporters' attitudes about contests than did the few editors who had not received awards. Those who thought prize winning had helped them in their careers reported a stronger influence than those who felt otherwise.

The degree that editors felt they influenced reporters' attitudes about prizes is related to how editors advise their staffs about competitions. The five editors who required contest entries had the strongest perceived influence: mild to fairly strong. Those who encouraged contest entries felt they had a slightly stronger than mild affect on their staffs' attitudes toward contests. Not surprisingly, editors who offered no advice felt they had very little influence.

Editors who indicated the most personal influence on reporters' attitudes toward awards usually chose their own and their papers' policies as contributing heavily to such influence. Most editors, however, chose reporters' personal drive and professional competitiveness as mainly affecting reporters' feelings about prize winning. These editors generally perceived slightly less editor influence.

Discussion and Conclusions

Most newspapers in this study had policies, usually informal, that encouraged prize seeking. The largest papers were most likely to have formal awards policies. Lack of policy was most prevalent among the smallest papers.

One explanation for this difference would appear to be the more bureaucratic versus less structured work settings of the large and small papers, respectively. Further, the major newspapers have the staff and resources to devote to seeking prizes. By contrast, small-daily staffs often are stretched too thin for the papers to be as concerned about awards competitions.

Most editors concurred with their papers' policies on contests. This was particularly so for editors on newspapers of 25,000 circulation or more and for those working on papers with formal or informal awards policies versus papers with no awards policies. Such agreement is understandable. Managing editors are often directly involved in establishing their papers' awards policies.

Similar to previous research,[20] increased prestige for the newspaper and for the reporter were regarded by most editors as among the greatest benefits of prize winning. A recent study reported that "winning journalism awards is related to perceived higher occupational prestige."[21]

Most managing editors in the Blankenburg and present study indicated that awards provide incentives for staffs to do better work.[22] But only half of this study's respondents considered proof of excellence as a primary value of competitions. In fact, over a third felt that prize winning is an erroneous standard of excellence.

Apparently, many editors who said awards bolstered journalistic prestige did not view them as a measure of achievement. This might suggest that the awards have become ends in themselves and raises a question for future study: Does prize journalism heighten performance or focus more attention on the importance of the reward than on the activity being rewarded?

The type of advice editors gave reporters about contests was related to how much influence editors perceived they had on their staffs and how much importance they placed on reporters' prize winning. The more emphasis that editors placed on contests, the greater weight they gave to awards when evaluating reporters for raises and promotions.

Many editors chose reporters' personal drive and competitiveness as contributing most to reporters' attitudes

toward awards. Fewer editors believed that they had much influence on how reporters viewed contests.

It would be interesting to compare this perception with the notions of reporters concerning editor influence. Research suggests that editors tend to overrate award winners' job satisfaction.[23] By the same token, editors may underestimate their influence on prize seeking.

This study used cross-sectional data which leaves questions of causality unanswered. Establishing the direction of the relationships awaits further research. Future investigation should also develop more refined measurement indices than the often previously untested ones applied in this study. Further, a larger sample could increase generalizability and allow more extensive subgroup inquiries.

Shortcomings aside, this study attempts to systematically examine editors' attitudes and behavior toward journalism awards. The findings may prove useful to newspaper editors and to those interested in identifying personal and organizational factors operating in prize journalism. The research may also provide additional understanding of an important influence on press performance.

NOTES

1. Bob Ingle, "We're Drowning in a Sea of Media Awards," The Masthead, 34:17-18 (Winter 1982).

2. Editor & Publisher, Dec. 27, 1986, pp. 1J-38J.

3. Even contests sponsored by commercial interests, who may only be looking for favorable coverage for their products or corporate images, draw applicants, creating conflict of interest worries among journalists. John L. Hulteng, The Messenger's Motives: Ethical Problems in the News Media (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), pp. 42-43.

4. Dan Corrigan, "The Janet Cooke Tragedy: A Lesson for J-Education," Journalism Educator, 36:8 (October 1981).

5. See, for example, "Major Journalism Awards," The Quill, 75:38-41 (June 1987).

6. See, for example, Laurence G. O'Donnell, "The Reflections of a Pulitzer Prize Juror," Wall Street Journal, April 13, 1982, p. 26; Mary Galligan, "Contested," The Quill, 69:34 (May 1981).

7. See, for example, William Green, "Janet's World: The Story of a Child Who Never Existed -- How and Why It Came to Be Published," Washington Post, April 19, 1981, p. 1.

8. Tom McNichol, "Proliferating Prizes: Too Much of a Good Thing?" Washington Journalism Review, 8:37 (July 1986). For a different perspective on winning a major prize, see Elliot G. Jaspin, "The Pulitzer Doesn't Always Spell Success," ASNE Bulletin, 638:17-18 (December/January 1981).

9. Randal A. Beam, Sharon Dunwoody and Gerald M. Kosicki, "The Relationship of Prize-winning to Prestige and Job Satisfaction," Journalism Quarterly, 63:693-699 (Winter 1986).

10. Gerald M. Kosicki, Sharon Dunwoody and Randal A. Beam, "Individual and Organizational Predictors of Journalistic Prize-Seeking," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention, Memphis, Tenn., August 1985.

11. William B. Blankenburg, "How Editors Regard Contests," APME News, 76:1, 8-9 (September 1974).

12. They perceived the main problems with contests to be self-serving commercial sponsorship, the questionable objectives of participants and the quality of judging. Ibid.

13. David Zinman, "Should Newsmen Accept PR Prizes?" Columbia Journalism Review, 9:37-43 (Spring 1970).

14. Rosemary McCarthy Peacock, "An Investigation of Attitudes and Behavior of Newspaper Editors Toward Journalism Prizes" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Nevada-Reno, March 1985).

15. Due to differences in nomenclature, the person sometimes chosen to receive the questionnaire was designated as editor, executive editor or news editor. In a few instances on small newspapers, the only applicable recipient was the publisher. Completion of the questionnaire on large metropolitan dailies was occasionally assigned to a subordinate editor, such as the assistant managing editor.

16. Broken down by region, approximately 30% of the editors were from the South, 25% from the Midwest, another 25% from the West, and 20% from the Northeast. These percentages are the same as those reported by the Wisconsin research team. Beam, op. cit., p. 695.

17. Blankenburg, op. cit.

18. Such comparisons are limited because only five editors said they required contest entries.

19. Personal drive referred to one's own motivation, whereas professional competitiveness was defined as vying with colleagues.

20. Ibid.; and Zinman, op. cit.

21. Beam, op. cit.

22. Blankenburg, op. cit.

23. Beam, op. cit.